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CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURES: SURVEY AND CRITIQUE

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Chinese Strategic Cultures: Survey and Critique

Christopher P. Twomey

In contrast to international-security studies, within the China field there seems to be little controversy about the proposition that “deep” history and culture are critical sources of strategic behavior. Indeed, most students of Chinese strategic thought and practice could be placed safely in a strategic-culture school of analysis, though few use the term explicitly.

—Alistair Iain Johnston¹

INTRODUCTION

Chinese culture is extensive and pervades everyday life throughout the country. As a society with millennia of history that is actively woven into the educational system, this substantial effect is not surprising. Beyond the effects on everyday life, however, is there also an effect of this deep, historically rooted culture on China’s international affairs?

In this paper I will lay out the traditional arguments made about Chinese strategic culture and pave the way for future evaluation of those arguments in explaining several important events in recent Chinese foreign policy. One mini-case is also attempted here, considering the possible implications of strategic cultural arguments for Chinese nuclear force posture.

Some elements of Chinese strategic culture do clearly appear in the historic record, but this paper will call into question the uniqueness of those forms of culture. (That is, many countries exhibit similar cultural predispositions.) Other aspects of purported Chinese strategic culture have fewer claims on empirical accuracy with regard to Chinese behavior. Given these concerns, the paper finds that strategic culture remains underspecified as an approach for understanding Chinese foreign and security policy. This is despite the substantial amount of high quality work that has been developed on the Chinese case, as the passage from Iain Johnston above suggests.²

¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 22.

² Indeed, this case has been studied more than any other, with the possible exception of the Soviet case, from the perspective of this lens.

DEFINITIONS

This project is endeavoring to use a unified definition of strategic culture. To wit, the project's working definition states that strategic culture is defined by:

shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.³

While using this definition, a few additional elements will be added for the purposes of this essay. First, it is important to be explicit about where exactly this culture resides. This is an important point, as it allows for added precision and attention to measuring the culture independently from the behavior it is suggested to shape. One recent alternate definition is explicit in this regard: "Strategic culture ... [is] the set of fundamental and enduring assumptions about the role of war in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force held by a country's political and military elites."⁴ This study will thus add that aspect—strategic culture is held by a country's political and military elites—to its working definition.⁵

Furthermore, the proposed definition for the project is rather broad with regard to what is meant by the "ends and means for achieving security objectives." An alternate important specification in this regard is laid out by Stephen Rosen:

[Strategic culture consists of] beliefs and assumptions that frame...choices about international military behavior, particularly those concerning decisions to go to war, preferences for offensive, expansionist or defensive modes of warfare, and levels of wartime casualties that would be acceptable.⁶

Similarly, this study will consider a wide range of possible effects of strategic culture: national security interests, understandings regarding the nature of international politics, preference for particular sorts of diplomatic or military strategies, and predisposition to certain operational tactics. This, then, is what this author will view the "ends and means" phrase is taken as meaning.

³ Kerry Kartchner, Presentation to Comparative Strategic Cultures, phase II, Park City, Utah, 3-5 May, 2006.

⁴ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2. Scobell is explicitly building on the definition used by Johnston. See Johnston.

⁵ Clearly, it is likely that those cultural beliefs are held more widely, but that need not always be the case; that is, there could be a divergence between the mass popular and elite levels of cultural beliefs.

⁶ Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs; (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 12.

These alternative definitions highlight that strategic cultures, in this author's view, might possibly exist at many levels. The rest of the paper will survey and evaluate the main arguments regarding the existence and explanatory power of multiple levels of strategic culture in Chinese security policy.

STRATEGIC CULTURES IN CHINA

This section will survey six different *themes* in Chinese strategic cultural arguments. The specific themes that this author argues are apparent in the Chinese culture are:

- Chinese fears regarding the security implications of weakness at home
- Chinese views regarding the hierarchical nature of international relations
- Chinese preferences for offensive strategies
- Chinese preferences for defensive strategies
- Risk acceptant Chinese strategy toward crisis management
- Chinese propensity to strike first in military operations

Several other themes relating ideational factors to Chinese policy will not be evaluated. Some are often used to explain past Chinese behavior only; these are less useful in understanding future Chinese actions.⁷ Others focus on a very narrow form of culture, that of the Chinese military itself; the merits of that approach relative to national level approaches are discussed elsewhere.⁸

Each of these themes is one element in the broad map of Chinese strategic culture. The different themes are not necessarily contradictory, although more than one of them might play a role in shaping China's behavior with regard to a specific issue. In that case, indeed they may work against each other (e.g., with one theme in the culture leading to stronger action and another leading to weaker action). However, in general, the themes are conceived of as independent.

⁷ In particular, there is a substantial literature on the role of communist and Maoist ideology in shaping Chinese security policy. While this author finds much of that quite convincing during the peak of the Mao period, its influence today is negligible. For examples of work on this earlier period in this vein, see Gerald Chan, *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations: A Framework for Analysis* (St. Martin's Press, 1999); Thomas J. Christensen, "Worse Than a Monolith: Disorganization and Rivalry within Asian Communist Alliances and U.S. Containment Challenges, 1949-69," *Asian Security* 1, no. 1 (2005); and Michael H. Hunt, *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995).

⁸ Christopher P. Twomey, "Chinese Doctrines as Strategic Culture: Assessing Their Effects," *Strategic Insights* IV, no. 10 (2005).

Indeed, it seems likely that this is the case for many countries. Most cultures have a rich set of traditions and narratives to draw upon. These legacies often stem from a wide variety of historic experience: formation of the state, early and recent conflict, religious motifs, ethnic identities, etc.⁹ There is every reason to expect that these vastly different sources of strategic culture will lead to a wide range of specific, independently discernible themes within the culture. There is no reason to expect that they would boil down to only one or two different themes, or that any contradictions between those themes would necessarily be resolved.¹⁰

That said, the way that the “lessons of history” are passed down through the generations is perhaps less pluralistic than the sources of those lessons (i.e., educational texts, approved media coverage, “historical” television dramatizations, etc., all of which *may* be controlled by a central authority). This might suggest that the nature of the reification of the cultural lessons might have a homogenizing effect. That is certainly possible, but ought to be a matter for empirical study, not blind assertion. Clearly, a more authoritarian government should have more capable tools to create a single cultural narrative.¹¹ One of the interesting things about China is that this has not been the case there. On some issues the government has been able to limit any historiographical debate.¹² However, as the discussion will show below, the strategic lessons of its history and culture is not such an issue. A wide range of views remains in play.¹³

The Importance of Unity of China

There are several different sources to arguments made regarding the importance of Chinese culture in shaping its national interests. All would point to a single conclusion: Chinese

⁹ For a discussion of the wide mosaic from which leaders can find historic or cultural themes upon which to base current strategy, see Richard J. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ This would not be the case if the historic lessons were so one sided that the contradictory themes were repeatedly shown to have “failed the test of time”, or proven inappropriate as a guide to policy for historic events. This is certainly possible, but it is likely to describe only such factors that are also equally well captured by broader, more parsimonious approaches to international relations, such as realism. For a particularly historically grounded statement of the tenets of realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1954).

¹¹ One thinks of the archetypal George Orwell, 1984, Reissue Edition ed. (New York, NY: Signet Classics, 1950).

¹² Here, the clearest example would be the Taiwan issue. See Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹³ The Chinese Communist Party’s view of Confucianism is suggestive. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), all things that smacked of the ancient Chinese cultural traditions were suppressed as backward. Yet, with some degree of rapidity those aspects of Chinese life rapidly returned to the mainstream of Chinese life in the 1980s and 90s as the reform period began. It was even used as a positive aspect of Chinese culture in 1990s government-led campaigns (the “Patriotic Education” campaign and the “Spiritual Civilization” campaign).

history teaches that *domestic weakness and chaos particularly threatening internationally*. That is, there is a view that for China in particular, any weakness at home will be pounced upon by foreign countries. This view is rooted firmly in the “100 years of humiliation” period beginning in the late Qing Dynasty as well as the earlier Warring States period (475 B.C. to 221 B.C.). Both these periods carry with them a clear lesson: a weak and divided China will be subject to substantial violence.

The Warring States period is an important cultural source for modern Chinese. Children will be familiar with its broad outlines, and many of the historic narratives in currency in China today stem from this period. This is the era of Confucius, Mencius, and Lord Shang, as well as the philosophies that they each generated (Confucianism for the first two, legalism for the third). The first emperor built the awe inspiring tombs of Xi'an. The eminent Sinologists John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman refer to the end of this period as “the first unification,” emphasizing its importance to the foundation myth of China.¹⁴ The era before final unification was characterized by extreme warfare: “During this time of rivalry and warfare, there was a widespread yearning for peace and order.”¹⁵ The scale of warfare is emphasized by other authors: “it does look possible that the major power of the third century BC could each raise armies comparable in size to all the armed forces of the Roman Empire.”¹⁶

The more recent period that further emphasized this core lesson of the dangers of weakness was the 100 years of humiliation. Beginning first with the Opium war in 1841, over the next century, China was beset by a wide range of invaders: Britain, France, Holland, Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, and—worst of all—Japan.¹⁷ For China today, the sources of this predation come from the weakness of the late Qing Dynasty. In the Chinese view, this weakness was typified by a series of rebellions and revolutions: the Taiping Uprising of 1850-64, the Nian Rebellion of 1951-68, Muslim revolts throughout the late 19th century, the Boxer Rebellion of 1898-1900, and finally the coup led by General Yuan Shikai in 1911 that brought down the last of imperial China's dynasties. Over the course of this century in Chinese

¹⁴ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China : A New History*, Enl. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ W.J.F. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History: The Roots of China's Crisis* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1992), 21.

¹⁷ For an engaging review of this period, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

history, it was carved up and its trade was primarily controlled by outsiders. Both formal and informal colonialism were pervasive.

Both of these periods in Chinese history, then, warn of the dangers of weak rule. They emphasize the dangers of civil war and suggest that the international arena is unrelentingly violent and predatory. This is said to lead to an excessive Chinese concern with maintaining stability at home, whatever the costs might be (in human rights or economic terms). This is a common theme particularly in the softer, less rigorous discussions of the way Chinese culture shapes its strategic behavior.¹⁸ It also helps to justify Chinese obsession with territorial integrity, as in either Taiwan or Tibet.¹⁹

While this is clearly an important theme in the ideology of Chinese foreign policy and nationalism, it is important to recognize that in no way are these conclusions unique to China. Most countries emphasize the importance of stability at home when international competition is tight and countries very rarely tolerate secession. China justifies these preference through its own history, but the end point is similar to that of most countries in the world.

Hierarchical Understanding of International Relations

China is also said to have a strong set of beliefs regarding the very nature of international relations that contrast sharply from a view derived from a particular reading of European reading in the post-Westphalian period.²⁰ In particular, China is said to be culturally predisposed to expect the prevalence of a hierarchical system in international affairs.

The argument here is that for much of its history, China lay at the core of an international system that looked to it for leadership. Not only is such a position “natural” from a Chinese cultural perspective, but regional players are also said to accept it readily. This is the so-called tributary state relationship. One of the clearest proponents of this view is David Kang:

¹⁸ The importance of lessons from the Warring States period is a persistent theme in Michael Pillsbury’s work. See for instance, Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2000), Prologue and 315. The lessons of the 100 years of humiliation pervade many works. See for instance, Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: And What It Means for the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 147. The general lessons suggested by these periods is a theme that pervades Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, Warfare and History; (London: New York, 2001).

¹⁹ For related discussion on the international sources of Chinese nationalism, see Chih-yu Shih, *Navigating Sovereignty: World Politics Lost in China* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Zhao.

²⁰ For a conventional view of the 1648 “Treaty of Westphalia system” see Bruce M. Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace : Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001), 16-20. Indeed as Russett and Oneal note: “The Westphalian system is a European construction,” suggesting it ought be viewed in regional—and therefore potentially, cultural—terms.

In this view Asian international relations emphasized formal hierarchy among nations, while allowing considerable informal equality. Consisting of China as the central state, and the peripheral states as lesser states or “vassals,” as long as hierarchy was observed there was little need for interstate war. This contrasts sharply with the western tradition of international relations that consisted of formal equality between nation-states, informal hierarchy, and almost constant interstate conflict.²¹

This view is based on the various periods when Chinese power—rather than being at its ebb, as discussed in the section above—was paramount in the East Asian region. In particular, the Ming Dynasty (1368) and the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) presided over periods of relative stability in the region. Beyond that, there were substantial periods characterized by tributary relationships between China and its surrounding powers.²²

One recent book makes a related point, examining the sources of state power in China and using those to explain the contrast between the European and Asian state systems.²³ Even though this analysis proceeds from structural and material causes, it is explicitly viewed as compatible with cultural approaches. Indeed, it illustrates the potential for synergy between material and structural approaches on the one hand and ideational or cultural approaches on the other. In this case, the influence provided by institutions set up to address early structural constraints can persist for a sustained period.²⁴

What this implies for Chinese foreign policy today is that there is an expectation that China will sit at the peak of a hierarchical set of relationships within Asia. Chinese leaders should be predisposed to seeing the world through this lens, and should expect that it is natural for China to regain its place at the peak of such a pyramid.

Predisposition for Defense ... or Offense

One of the most enduring views about Chinese strategic culture is that it is primarily defensive. Iain Johnston describes this conventional wisdom in the field as follows:

²¹ David Kang, "Hierarchy and Stability in Asian International Relations," in *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific*, ed. G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 164. Kang, a professor at Dartmouth, also has a forthcoming book that will develop this and related themes.

²² For discussion of this in earlier periods, see Fairbank and Goldman, 112-13.

²³ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁴ On the power of such institutions and path dependency in general, see Douglass Cecil North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*, Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Most would argue that Chinese strategic culture uniquely stresses nonviolent political or diplomatic means to deal with adversaries, or—when forces is absolutely necessary—the controlled, defensive use of violence. This has given Chinese strategic behavior a distinctive minimally violent character.²⁵

This defensive outlook is sometimes linked to Chinese Confucian philosophies and Daoist moralities.²⁶ One oft-heard element of this stresses the predisposition for China to build walls to solve security problems.²⁷ The guidance of Sun Zi is typically interpreted as supporting this view through its emphases on the high costs of fighting, the importance in carefully choosing the time of battle, the value of deceit for winning strategic—if not battlefield—victories, etc.²⁸

However, there is also a substantial, and indeed more highly regarded academically, literature on precisely the opposite point. Iain Johnston's highly regarded study of a wide range of classic writings on strategy from the Ming dynasty concludes that there were several strategic cultures competing at that time. The most dominant is a more offensive, violent form, which he refers to as a set of *parabellum* strategic preferences. These he equates to a hard-core realpolitik approach to international security.²⁹ A similar emphasis can be found in other scholars' work.³⁰

Risk Prone Style of Coercive Diplomacy

A final strategic cultural approach to Chinese security policy focuses rather narrowly on the way force is used. This argument suggests that Chinese statecraft is comfortable with manipulating tensions within crises and does not view the “use of force” as a particularly

²⁵ Johnston, 22.

²⁶ See, for instance, Rosita Dellios, ““How May the World Be at Peace?”: Idealism as Realism in Chinese Strategic Culture,” in *Culture & Foreign Policy*, ed. Valerie M. Hudson (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997).

²⁷ Discussion of the accuracy of this point is one of the many themes of Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*, Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature, and Institutions; (Cambridge University Press, 1990). See also Julia Lovell, *The Great Wall: China against the World, 1000 BC - 2000 AD* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2006). The leading Chinese foreign policy textbook plays off of this theme in its title: Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

²⁸ Several of these factors are discussed in the first chapter of Chen-Ya Tien, *Chinese Military History: Ancient and Modern* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1992).

²⁹ See Johnston, xi.

³⁰ Terrill, Ross, *The New Chinese Empire: And What it Means for the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

important threshold.³¹ Additionally, Chinese leaders are said to view crises as both dangerous and potential opportunities.³²

Renowned Sinologist Allen Whiting emphasizes related themes throughout his thoroughly researched corpus.³³ In one recent survey, he notes: “The political-military pattern of PLA deployment from 1950 to 1996 showed certain consistent characteristics, such as early warning for deterrence, seizure of the initiative, risk acceptance, and risk management.”³⁴ Central to much of his analysis is a preference for the Chinese military to take the initiative. He also notes a Chinese tolerance for risk taking: “The PLA has repeatedly projected its power across China’s borders, at times increasing the risk of war. ... To be sure, various steps were adopted to lessen the risk of escalation, but they were minor by comparison with actions that heightened the risk.”³⁵

Clearly, this is an important bias in Chinese policymaking. If this is an accurate characterization of Chinese policy than the prospects for inadvertent escalation in crises the Chinese are involved in is substantial. This aspect of Chinese strategic culture is particularly worrisome as the potential for nuclear crises increases as the PLA’s arsenal increases and the interaction between PLAN strategic naval assets and USN conventional assets intensifies.

Propensity to Strike First

The Chinese are often said to have a propensity for striking first, taking the initiative, and making use of surprise to achieve victory.³⁶ Key examples of this practice in modern Chinese foreign policy behavior are the Chinese offensive in the late fall of 1950 in Korea, the sudden

³¹ On the importance of thresholds, “red lines,” and focal points, see Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), and Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

³² This common argument is based on a superficial linguistic analysis of the characters in the word “crisis,” 危机 (*weiji*) and has no accuracy in the way the term actually has meaning in Chinese.

³³ Allen S. Whiting, “China’s Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan,” *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001); Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1960); and Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina*, Michigan Studies on China (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

³⁴ Whiting, “China’s Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan,” 124.

³⁵ Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence*, 236.

³⁶ This is a theme taken up in Whiting, “China’s Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan.” See also frequent mention in the texts selected by Pillsbury in his compilations: Michael Pillsbury, *Chinese Views of Future Warfare* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1998); and , Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2000).

attack on Indian forces in 1962, and the pedagogical war against Vietnam in 1979.³⁷ In each case, the Chinese attacks were sudden and largely unexpected. They were often preceded with a degree of strategic misdirection, enhancing their surprise. This element is also apparent in the Chinese civil war.³⁸

While it is true that this is a practice common in China's military, it would be rather narrow to suggest that this is a peculiarly Chinese behavior. The United States routinely aims to gain the initiative,³⁹ as do most other military forces in the world.⁴⁰ Gaining the initiative in military operations is a common theme in military classics of any language.⁴¹ There are no comparative statistical studies that suggest China is more prone to this than other countries.⁴²

CHINESE STRATEGIC CULTURE IN PRACTICE

This paper will focus on several aspects of Chinese policy toward weapons of mass destruction, in particular to nuclear weapons, to assess the strategic culture arguments laid out above.⁴³ It will consider three areas in particular: what drove Chinese decisions to acquire nuclear weapons in the first place; how does China think about the possibility of using nuclear weapons; and what are Chinese beliefs about proliferation of nuclear or other WMD.

Other cases would merit study, but are excluded give space constraints. The 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis touches on several of the core themes raised above, so it should be evaluated as well. Chinese policy toward Southeast Asia since approximately 2002 warrants additional study because it appears to represent an important shift in overall Chinese foreign

³⁷ With regard to the first two of these, the classic works are Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu*, and Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

³⁸ See for instance Mao's decision to cross the Yangtze River in 1949.

³⁹ See for instance the ways in which the Afghan and Iraqi campaigns were begun, to say nothing of the Inchon landings, the Normandy landings, the

⁴⁰ Prominent examples are the Pakistani campaign in 1999; both the Egyptians and Israelis in 1967; the Egyptians in 1973; the North Vietnamese in 1968, 1973, and 1975; the Argentines in 1982; the Germans in 1938 and 1940; the Japanese in 1941; etc.

⁴¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁴² Furthermore, at an anecdotal level, there are plenty of examples of the lack of initiative from the PLA: after the Second Offensive, the PLA rarely held the initiative in the Korean War; the 1969 border clash with the Soviets show only intermittent signs of the Chinese use of this tactic; the Vietnam incursion in 1979 displayed an initial surprise attack, but thereafter it bogged down in less creative frontal assaults.

⁴³ It is important to note that WMD policy is a relatively hard test for strategic cultural theories. That is, given that these weapons raise issues of the absolutely highest stakes for any country, it is not unreasonable to expect that traditional realpolitik factors might weigh relatively heavily in these cases. That said, given the claims made for strategic cultural work, it is not unreasonable to suggest strong tests for a theory.

policy. The ongoing PLA modernization efforts with an eye toward Taiwan scenarios would also seem important.⁴⁴ Finally, current Sino-Japanese relations certainly are related to nationalism in both states, and strategic cultural approaches would seem to be useful in analyzing that case. Fuller studies of all these cases should be considered for follow on research.⁴⁵

Each of the WMD cases will be discussed in turn. Within each, the discussion begins with a thumbnail sketch of Chinese policy and then turns toward assessing that policy from a strategic cultural perspective to see what, if any, conclusions follow from it.

China's Decision to Acquire Nuclear Weapons

Thumbnail Sketch

For the first several years of the PRC's existence, nuclear weapons were not a high priority.⁴⁶ Mao had repeatedly expressed disdain for the utility of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the Three-anti and Five-anti campaigns of 1951 and 1952, respectively, as well as the early collectivization campaigns in 1952 and 1953 were very hard on social elites, including those with a technical background. This would undermine China's later ability to actively pursue the development of atomic weapons.

However, China began its nuclear weapons program in earnest in January 1955 following coercive threats in the 1954-55 Taiwan Straits.⁴⁷ Initially, the program relied heavily on Beijing's ideological ally in Moscow.⁴⁸ During this period, the highpoint of their alliance, Moscow had promised to deliver an atomic weapon design and gave substantial support to Chinese industrial development. However, following the bitter collapse of the relationship and withdrawal of Soviet advisors in 1960, the Chinese atomic weapons development plan was set back substantially. This period coincided with an acute radicalization of politics in China; indeed the Great Leap Forward was a major component leading to the collapse of the Sino-

⁴⁴ Indeed, this is an area perhaps quite promising for strategic culture, as even a cursory view might suggest some emphasis on risk prone crisis diplomacy and an emphasis on military initiative in the elliptical doctrinal writings regarding possible Taiwan scenarios available from PLA affiliated sources.

⁴⁵ It is this author's sense that this would exhaust the major cases meriting consideration today. Additional suggestions in this regard would certainly be welcomed.

⁴⁶ Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Differences, Misperception, and Deterrence Failure* (Monterey, Calif.: Naval Postgraduate School, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Gordon H. Chang, "To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis," *International Security* 12, no. 4 (1988).

⁴⁸ John Wilson Lewis and Litai Xue, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Soviet Alliance.⁴⁹ It required the active intervention of the senior Chinese leadership to ensure that this radicalization did not interfere with the ongoing research and development in the Chinese nuclear program.⁵⁰ (During the Cultural Revolution, this required the active intervention of Zhou Enlai.) Nevertheless, in 1964 at the Lop Nor test site, the Chinese successfully tested the culmination of their own indigenous development program.

Delivery systems lagged somewhat, with the initial focus on deterring the Soviet Union. With the deployment of the DF-4 in 1974 and the subsequent deployment of the DF-5 in 1981, the Chinese had the semblance of a nuclear deterrent.

Applying Strategic Culture

The Chinese nuclear weapons development program was reactive and delayed at key points by ideological factors, although these were not ideational factors that one would typically refer to as “strategic cultural” in nature. Rather, it was the Communist ideology and Maoism in particular that accounted for the early delays in starting and deploying nuclear weapons. The way the program was initially organized drew on close collaboration with Beijing’s close ideological ally. The long delays between the early 1960s success in testing an atomic warhead to the mid-1980s before a reasonably sized arsenal had been fielded capable of threatening Beijing’s two greatest threats are accounted for by the ideological excess of the Cultural Revolution. These various factors are clearly quite important to the development of the Chinese nuclear program. Further, the core of these factors exists in ideas: it was not material factors that accounted for these aspects of the program. But none of these factors are linked in any meaningful way with the six elements of Chinese strategic culture that were described at the outset of this essay.

Additionally, it is also clear that much of the impetus behind the nuclear program comes from material factors. Mao’s ideologically based pejorative views of nuclear weapons were overcome only through direct and repeated threats to China that could only be addressed through an indigenous nuclear weapons program. The eventual reactions by China can indeed be explained through basic power politics logic, although the delays along the way are quite interesting and revolve around ideational factors.

⁴⁹ See Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 64-84. The classic cite on this period is Michael Yahuda, *The Origins of the Sino-Soviet Rift*.

⁵⁰ Lewis and Xue, Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1990).

Chinese Nuclear Force Posture

Thumbnail Sketch

Chinese nuclear force posture has exhibited a number of persistent components over the course of the last 40 years. Most important of these is a relatively small arsenal size, particularly when compared to the superpowers.⁵¹ Even when compared to the other declared powers (Britain and France) China's arsenal looks quite modest given its relatively challenging security situation compared to that of France and Britain.⁵² This sized arsenal has not shifted in scale dramatically at any point after its initial buildup in the wake of the 1964 test. There has clearly been a substantial modernization effort, moving to a more secure arsenal that is beginning to incorporate modern, road mobile ICBMs (DF-31s and eventually DF-31As). Beyond that, clearly creating a deployable SSBN has remained a priority for decades, since the early failures of the Xia-class submarine confined it to port. These appear likely to reach fruition soon, although that same assessment was made years ago, so some caution is warranted.⁵³

Second, Chinese doctrine has consistently been one of “no first use,” emphasizing nuclear weapons utility only as a retaliatory force. Chinese rhetoric has been clear on this point, but beyond that, its strategic forces have—to date—not developed the sorts of technical qualities needed for first strike capabilities (accurate reentry systems, space based intelligence, etc.). More generally, the doctrine—as best can be assessed from the outside—remains one of “limited” or “minimal deterrence.”⁵⁴ Finally, the Chinese investment in command and control for its nuclear forces remains limited. Of particular relevance to this study: to date, the PLA has

⁵¹ See William M. Arkin, Robert S. Norris, and Joshua Handler, *Taking Stock: Worldwide Nuclear Deployments, 1998* (Washington, DC: NRDC Nuclear Program, 1998), Table 1, p. 1. This gave operational arsenal sizes at that time as follows: US-8425, Russia-10,240, Britain-380, France-450, and China-400. All but China's arsenals are substantially smaller today.

⁵² For a contrary view, see Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's statements in Singapore. However, from a Chinese perspective, Beijing faces potential threats from the United States, Japan, India, all at the great power level.

⁵³ Indeed, while the Pentagon ascribes IOC status to the DF-31 (initial operational capability), the Type-94 is not mentioned by name anywhere in the report nor described under the report's description of modernization efforts of the PLA. Department of Defense, *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China, 2005: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2005), 29. Other sources note the Type-94 was launched in July 2004. Lyle J. Goldstein, with Andrew S. Erickson, ed., *China's Nuclear Force Modernization* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2005), 3.

⁵⁴ See Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," *International Security* 20, no. 3 (1995/96). While this piece is increasingly dated, there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that it is inaccurate.

not developed the integrated, efficient sorts of systems that would permit a war fighting doctrine.⁵⁵

Applying Strategic Culture

How does this nuclear force posture fit in with the various strategic cultural perspectives discussed above? The short answer is “not well.” Indeed, without even engaging in a challenging “three-cornered” test to assess the merits of a strategic culture approach against other accepted theories,⁵⁶ the approach does not provide basic correlation with the thumbnail sketch laid out above.

The strategic cultural approaches that would seem most likely to apply would be the preferences for defensive or offensive strategies, the risk accepting behavior in crises, and in particular the Chinese preference for taking the initiative. Each is discussed in turn.

The former strategic culture is quite hard to apply in any case, not just in this one. Since there is a core disagreement about whether the culture is predisposed to offensive or defense strategies, any outcome is both consistent and inconsistent with the theory. That is, the theory itself is indeterminate. Similarly, the development of more modern nuclear weapons is viewed somewhat contradictorily in the field of security studies. While clearly weapons of great tactical offensive capability, in the context of two nations with secure second strikes, nuclear weapons are often viewed as being weapons of use only for the strategic defense.⁵⁷

But beyond these general concerns, in the specific case of current Chinese doctrine, it is incompatible with the more sophisticated assessment of Chinese strategic culture: that of Iain Johnston. Rather than pursue a particularly offensive form of nuclear policy, as the United States and Soviet Union did throughout the Cold, the Chinese have taken a very relaxed posture towards competing at multiple levels of the escalatory ladder.⁵⁸ Instead, the Chinese have seemed to accept a version of existential deterrence that has extremely low demands to achieve

⁵⁵ Even Polk, who draws inflammatory conclusions on the basis on non-existent evidence and assertions rather than analysis, would agree with this statement. The most he would allege is that China might be moving towards a C² capability that might permit launch on warning. Stephen Polk, "China's Nuclear Command and Control," in *China's Nuclear Force Modernization*, ed. Lyle J. Goldstein, with Andrew S. Erickson (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2005), 20.

⁵⁶ On the merits of such Lakatosian tests, see Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵⁷ Richard K. Betts, "Must War Find a Way? A Review Essay," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999).

⁵⁸ Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York, Praeger, 1965).

deterrence of the other side.⁵⁹ None of this would appear consistent with a propensity for offensive strategies.

Other forms of strategic culture that could be applied are more straightforward to evaluate. They would predict a certain Chinese propensity for risk taking in wielding nuclear threats in its crisis diplomacy. Additionally, it would predict that China would develop the capability to take the initiative in a nuclear conflict. Again, there is no evidence of either of these points. China has brandished nuclear threats only in two known instances in the post-Cold War era. One occurrence came from a low level, non-operational general officer (Zhu Chenghu). The other, from Xiong Guangkai, came from a more senior official. However, it is clear that the threat was intended as a promise of retaliation, not a threat to initiate or even escalate.⁶⁰ As such, it does not seem to be particularly risk accepting. More fundamentally, two instances of nuclear threat brandishing do not constitute a risk acceptant form of foreign policy. Nor has China engaged in any military signaling that could be characterized as displays of force on the nuclear side.⁶¹

Indeed, there almost seems to be a culture of “no first use” doctrine that is restraining military innovation in China in ways that directly contradict strategic cultural arguments.⁶² Nevertheless, this culture of “no first use” is clearly an ideational form of restraint, and if indeed it is preventing rational innovation, that is a powerful source of hard-core international security behavior.

Chinese Proliferation Policy

Thumbnail Sketch

The legacy of Chinese proliferation behavior is anything but positive from a Western perspective. China has been linked with proliferation of WMD or long-range missiles to

⁵⁹ Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23 and 54.

⁶⁰ This is contrary to the initial newspaper reports regarding the utterance. But this is what the American source on the story, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman, states was the statement. See Stephanie Lieggi, *Going Beyond the Stir: The Strategic Realities of China's No-First-Use Policy* [NTI: Issue Brief] (Nuclear Threat Initiative, December 2005, accessed); available from http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_70.html.

⁶¹ Although it is certainly possible that some of this sort of activity has occurred and was not reported in the open literature. However, given the usual excellent sources of Bill Gertz at the *Washington Times* on this sort of issue, it would be surprising if no inkling of this had trickled out.

⁶² Author's interviews in Beijing in June 2006 suggest that despite the existence of some debate over nuclear doctrine in China, and in particular, over the credibility of no first use in the context of American nuclear developments with regard to the Nuclear Posture Review and missile defense, there has been a clear decision to retain the no first use doctrine.

Pakistan, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. As this roster includes the bulk of the key countries of strategic interest to the United States, this is clearly an important issue for the United States to understand.

Since the early 1990s, however, China has—gradually and haltingly, to be sure—moderated its proliferation behavior. It has signed on to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and adheres to the Missile Technology Control Regime rules. It has apparently curtailed its support for Pakistan, long a key strategic ally. It has participated positively in security UN Security Council reprimands against both Iran and North Korea in the very recent past.

In accounting for this shift in behavior, several recent studies point to the role of the creation of an arms control-savvy bureaucracy within the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁶³ This development has been supported by the existence of transnational communities of like-minded analysts and scholars of the issue.

While it is unquestionable that Chinese behavior remains far from ideal from the United States' perspective (one need only see the recent levying of sanctions by the U.S. Department of State), it is also clear that the main theme over the past 10 years has been one of positive change.

Applying Strategic Culture

As in the first case summarized above, the key causal role here is played by ideational factors, but not ones that are particularly related to strategic culture. Rather, it is something akin to reversion to the international norm that has accounted for the most interesting changes in Chinese foreign policy in this issue area.⁶⁴

With regards to specific themes in the strategic cultural arguments listed above, a few points might be made. In terms of the Chinese propensity for preferring a “united state,” some of the oft-cited (and undoubtedly genuine in at least some cases) excuses from Beijing that proliferation is occurring due to poor policing of localities and private firms is a concern. Such freelancing on a core security issue ought be viewed with the utmost of concern. The view of China at the core of an international relations hierarchy in Asia might play some explanatory role with regard to North Korea- and perhaps Pakistan-bound proliferation, but hardly provides any

⁶³ Wendy Frieman, *China, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation* (New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); and Evan S. Medeiros, *Chasing the Dragon: Assessing China's System of Export Controls for Wmd-Related Goods and Technologies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), MG-353.

⁶⁴ For arguments on the importance of global norms, see Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention : Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

insight into other, further afield recipients. The other themes would seem to suggest little about China's proliferation behavior.⁶⁵

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS

It is of course premature to draw any firm conclusions on the basis of a few thumbnail sketches within a single issue area given the extensive literature on strategic culture and the apparent affinity for it that many Sinologists display. The alternate cases suggested above would be obvious next steps for evaluation.

Beyond that, it will be important to put several of these arguments in comparative perspective in two ways. First, to what extent are these strategic cultures unique to China? Second, what do these forms of strategic cultural argument allow us to understand that other theories do not? Without explicitly addressing these points, there is no chance that the arguments made in these cases will capture a wider audience.

That said, two important conclusions arise from this application of a strategic cultural lens to Chinese nuclear policy. First, these case studies have found repeated support for the role of ideational factors in shaping important details in Chinese policy. Second, however, these ideational factors have come from a wide range of sources, and the deep historical cultural roots that are at the heart of strategic cultural analysis are not among them. Often, the role of "strategic culture" has been outweighed by other factors leading to policy refuting the predictions of the strategic cultural approach.

⁶⁵ It is not impossible to spin out ways that a risk-acceptant attitude toward crisis management might play a role, but since proliferation is rarely a crisis management policy, but rather takes place over a period of years, such an argument would be viewed skeptically by this author.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Sources that explicitly address strategic cultural in Chinese security policy at the broadest level:

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Sources that explicitly address strategic cultural themes in Chinese policy at the tactical or operational level:

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- Terrill, Ross. *The New Chinese Empire: And What It Means for the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Sources that emphasize the role of Communist ideology in shaping Chinese security policy:

- Chan, Gerald. *Chinese Perspectives on International Relations : A Framework for Analysis*. St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Hunt, Michael H. *The Genesis of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Sources that explicitly refute cultural explanations:

- Nathan, Andrew J., and Robert S. Ross. *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Sources on Chinese WMD that incorporate at least some element of cultural factors.

- Lewis, John Wilson, and Litai Xue. *China Builds the Bomb*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- _____. *China's Strategic Seapower : The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age*. Studies in International Security and Arms Control; Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Lin, Chong-Pin. *China's Nuclear Weapons Strategy : Tradition within Evolution*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988.

⁶⁶ That is, these authors do not use the social science terminology of cultural analysis, but nevertheless cultural factors pervade their causal arguments.